

The Courage to Love
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Texts: John 14: 15-21 and I Peter 3: 13-18, 4: 1-2

Please pray with me;

Loving Lord, let your Spirit's presence with us open our hearts and minds to hear you speaking to us. May your Word encourage us, emboldened us, so we might be transformed into Christ's likeness, we pray. Amen.

Last Sunday our text likened us to 'living stones'. We were reminded we are dynamic and interdependent parts of a living body, the body of Christ, the Church. (I Pe 2:4-5) Today, the lectionary texts teach us what it means for us to be 'living stones', to live as vital members of this spiritual community built on Christ, and sent by Christ into God's world.

I enjoy finding images - like 'living stones' - in a Bible passage. Such symbolism brings a story to life; it can reveal a universal truth. Metaphors give scripture personal and contemporary significance, they are one reason we call scripture 'The Living Word'. My favorite example of this is Peter's water walk, found in the gospel of Matthew.

The story begins when Jesus sends the disciples ahead of him, while he retreats alone to pray. (Mt 14:22-36) The disciples board a boat to travel across the lake. While it is dark, strong winds and the subsequent waves, make navigating the boat more difficult. Jesus sees this, and heads toward them, walking across the water. When the disciples see someone in the distance, they are frightened.

So Jesus calls to them, "It is I! Don't be afraid." Peter responds, 'Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you on the water.' 'Come.' Jesus answers; and Peter gets out of the boat. He climbs out of the boat and steps on the stormy sea; and for a time, he successfully, miraculously, walks across the surface of the water toward Jesus. That is, until the wind and the waves regain his attention. Peter becomes afraid and begins

to sink; and he calls to Jesus for help. Jesus holds out his hand, lifts Peter up, and as he does, he talks to Peter about faith. Once they are both safely in the boat, the wind dies down.

These are the facts of the story; it's symbolism reveals that Peter's water walk is a metaphor for living a Christian life. We *choose* to walk with Christ; and when we do, he invites us to join him in accomplishing extraordinary things. Our partnership with Jesus is far from passive, it takes courage and faith to walk with him. It takes a great deal of trust, just to get out of the boat.¹ If Peter's walk across the surface of the sea is a metaphor for our relationship with Jesus, the wind and buffeting waves - symbolize the many day to day personal, corporate and social challenges we confront.

Peter's walk on the lake teaches - that success in our Christian endeavors - depends on our focus. Should we turn our attention away from God, take our eyes off Jesus.² - Should we forget that it is God's Spirit who makes it possible for us to do the things Jesus calls us to do; - we can be overwhelmed by the threats we encounter, the problems that arise, and we risk being swallowed by the obstacles we face.

Our Christian hope, the promise that is God's gift to us within Peter's story, is that Jesus is always close by, ready to rescue us if we falter, to lift us up and speak to us. While supported in his arms, Jesus tutors us, so we can learn from our mistakes.

And I notice that Jesus did not calm the sea before he invited Peter to walk with him. We deceive ourselves should we believe our Christian walk should be without difficulties.³ Peter's water walk is an awesome story; it is encouraging, instructive, and hopeful. It is also a reminder that our commitment to Christ, that loving God, does not

¹ Ortberg, John, *If You Want to Walk On Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*, (Grand Rapids, MI Zondervan, 2001) p. 10.

² *Ibid.* p. 19.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

protect us from challenges; rather, we can always depend on God to be a present help to us when we are doing God's bidding.

Not every Bible passage is like this, a story filled with miraculous facts and timeless metaphors. Other texts offer clear, prescriptive lessons. These *can* be less complicated messages to interpret. Well, it may not *always* be so easy, - not when a lesson's directives don't leave room for us to wiggle out of them.

Our Gospel and Epistle readings this morning - are such straightforward instructions. On the night before he died, Jesus tells the disciples, 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments.' And in the epistle attributed to Peter, he writes, 'Do not be intimidated. For it is better to suffer for doing good, than to suffer for doing evil.' Study these two texts together and we have explicit direction for living life in a manner that pleases God, and for participating with Christ in advancing God's kingdom.

We do, by nature, look for wiggle room - when given a rule to follow. So it would be helpful to know the commandments Jesus expects us to keep. It is not surprising that Jesus was once asked, 'What is the greatest commandment?' To which he answered, "The most important one is this: 'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

His words are not original. Jesus is quoting portions of Deuteronomy and Leviticus. They also echo the prophet Micah, 'What does the Lord require of you, - but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.' (Mic 6:8)

Love God; love your neighbor. Advocate for what is fair, be compassionate, and do this, with humility. Noble, righteous lifestyle choices that sound admirable, even desirable, but these are not easy values to *consistently* embrace - once we leave the

sanctuary to live and work in the world. God knows this. Peter understood this, and he was inspired to write, 'Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer - for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord.'

Christ's commandments and Peter's advice - guide how we act - with our families and friends, in the workplace, - within our communities, and on behalf of the world. This is a challenge to practice our faith in every facet of our lives, - an invitation to make righteous choices, - in our homes, in the boardroom, and in the creation of public policy.

Specific examples of such faithful conduct are as individual as we are. I suspect we each already know - just where and how God is inviting us to speak and act for justice, to advocate for mercy, to extend compassion to a stranger. And we are acutely aware of the times and places we are reticent to demonstrate our love for God, our commitment to Christian discipleship.

We *know* our personal obstacles to living as Christ calls us to live. God knows our human frailty as well; and has responded to our weaknesses - with the gift of his Son. This is the hope that distinguishes our Christian faith; Christ, God incarnate, lived among us - to model righteous living and mortal suffering; now his death and resurrection make it possible for us to imitate him, to follow him. We are a forgiven people, empowered and supported by the gracious gift of God's Spirit.

In verses immediately following our text, Jesus describes one purpose of the Holy Spirit. 'The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.' (Jn 14:26)

And the faithful behavior named in Christ's commandments? And by Micah? They are the *gifts we receive* from the Holy Spirit: faith, wisdom, generosity, mercy, concern, love, - to name a few. (I Co 13, 14, Ro 12)

We can live as God commands; we can do this! Christ's example and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit make it possible. We've been promised this. We (red) read these words from Jesus, just last week; 'Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do, and in fact, will do greater works than these.' (Jn 14:12)

We are not yet perfect. We can be inhibited, despite our desire to reach our divinely endowed potential as 'living stones'. There are times and places we acquiesce to the status quo, turn a blind eye to someone's suffering, we fail to forgive, and then we rationalize our choices.

How does this happen? I can only speak for myself. I make excuses for myself when I am afraid. When I fear for my reputation, when I am uncertain of the future, when I am afraid I could be hurt. When I am afraid to fail.

Fear is a powerful emotion. Yet, 'There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear,' writes one epistle author. (I Jn 4:18) Our trust in God's love for us, by God's grace, has the power to displace any fear. In his discourse at the Passover meal, Jesus encourages his friends, 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.' (Jn 14:1)

And he concludes the evening, saying, 'I have told you these things that you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.'
(Jn 16:33)

Our faith and trust, with God's peace - remove all fear and replace it with courage. Righteous courage is faith in action, our committed determination to act as Christ commands. Armed with confidence, graced with peace of mind, centered in God's love, we need not be intimidated when an occasion presents itself - to speak or act with kindness, compassion, to advocate for what is just. We can explain our decisions and justify our positions respectfully and with kindness.

Should we suffer, if we are ridiculed, or even harmed for doing what is right, we will be blessed. We are blessed to experience the miracles God accomplishes through us, - when we have the courage to love God so much, - that we desire to become a 'living stone', to participate in the work to which we are called - with emboldened obedience.

Love compels us to be 'living stones', God's love of us, our love of God. This is the love that called Peter out of the boat; the love that motivated him to ask, 'Lord, let me walk with you!' Love gave Peter the courage to swing his legs over the side of the boat. And while sitting on its edge, his feet wet in the water, it is love - which gave him the courage to let go⁴ and stand up - and trust that he was safe.

The world needs the people of God to be a voice for the oppressed, to model kindness and compassion. We are charged with the task - of demonstrating that it is possible - to do justice, and love kindness, and to do this boldly, trusting that God's Spirit gifts us with every tool we require.

⁴ Ibid. p. 19.

But first we are asked, we are commanded, - to love God. Our love for God is nurtured when we spend time with God, - in worship, prayer, meditation, - when we meet to engage in study and Christian conversation.

When we live with God and God in us, the Holy Spirit grows in us *passionate* compassion for others, grants us the courage to leave our comfort zone, and instills in us the humility which recognizes - our achievements are born of God's grace. Love, courage, and humility are what keep our hearts and minds focused on Christ, and invite God to use us to heal the world.

New opportunities to be kind and just *will* present themselves. It is my prayer that we will recognize these moments in the coming week - and summon the love and courage to respond without fear. And then, may we return, here, next Sunday, to share our stories, to encourage one another, and to worship together the Lord our God, with all our heart, soul and mind, - with all our strength - with all our being. May our hearts' desire be - to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with God.

Amen, and amen.